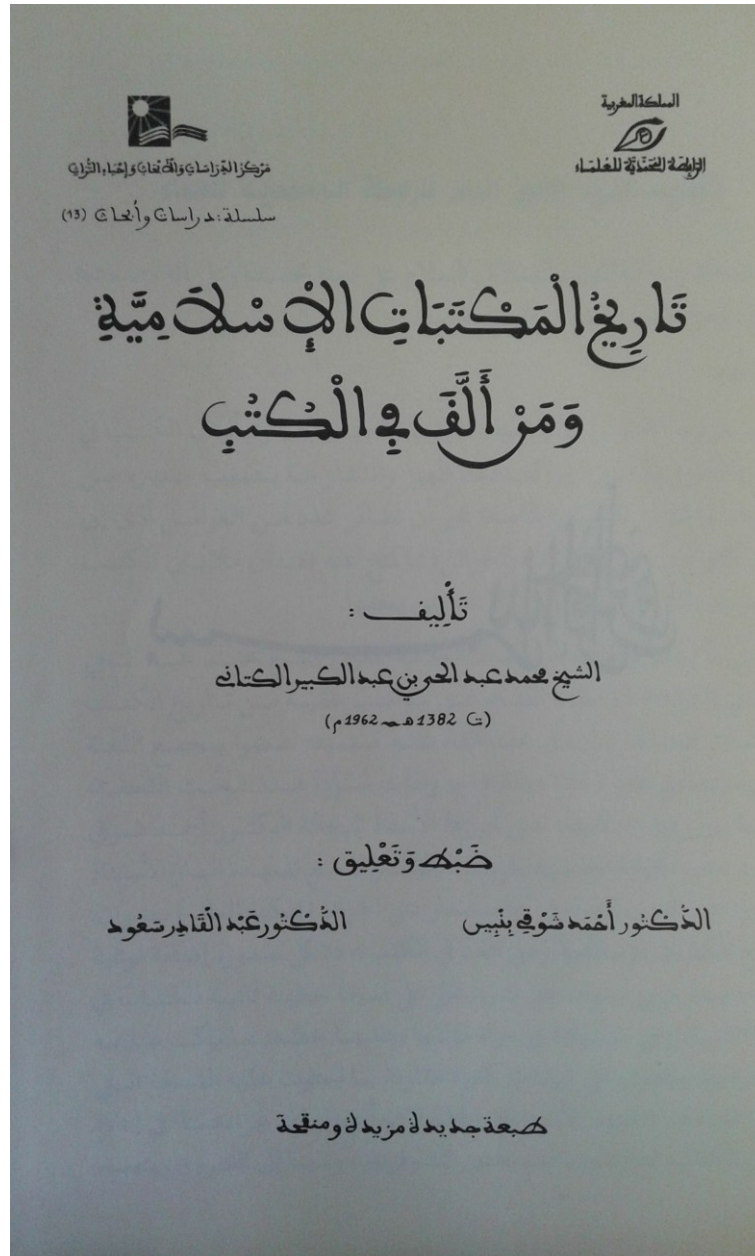


BOOK REVIEW

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Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Ḥayy al-Kattānī. *Tarīkh al-maktabāt al-islāmiyya wa-man allafa fīl-kutub* (History of Islamic Libraries and Bibliographers). Ed. Aḥmad Shawqī Binbīn and ‘Abd al-Qādir Sa‘ūd. Rabat: Markaz al-Dirāsāt wal-Abḥāth wal-Turāth, 1434/2013. Hardback. 615 pp. RDMK (Arabic ISBN): 978-9954-542-05-7.



The greatest transmissologist (*musnid*) of the last century and Moroccan genealogist Shaykh Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Ḥayy al-Kattānī (1302-1382/1885-1962) is known mostly for his *Fahras al-Fahāris* (Catalogue of catalogues) which is an encyclopedia of chains of transmissions and of the most important narrators of hadith and other disciplines from the earliest times to his. This is a nearly equally important book of his on Islamic book repositories and historians, edited on the basis of two autograph manuscripts with abundant footnotes. It is a superbly Beirut-bound, gold-spined edition of a major work that is not only of interest to hadith specialists and intellectual historians but also highly representative of Islamic cultural civilization as a whole, particularly in the Maghreb of the pre-modern and modern periods. As its exordium shows, the work was originally conceived as the author’s maiden speech at his appointment to the Arabic Language Academy of Damascus in 1929 and was thus intended as an education of “eastern” ulema about the North African heritage.

The first forty pages of the work survey early writing culture from the time of the righteous caliphs to the Abbasids in refutation of Jirjī Zaydān’s claim in *Tārīkh al-tamaddun al-islāmī* that the latter were the first to create Islamic libraries. The main part of the work takes up the first 400 pages and begins with an overview of book culture in the Prophetic Sunna and the following centuries in a lush, anecdotal, travelogue-like and quotation-heavy style. Al-Kattānī shows the proliferation of Muslim scholarly production, specifically manuscripts, across the centuries and especially in the near and far Maghreb, at a phenomenal rate—or rather miraculous, since such was divinely-supported work in which human energies were decupled beyond the ken of ordinary people. At the mere level of cross-generational study and the steady pursuit of knowledge from the mouths of the people of learning, students traditionally displayed a determination which brought them to the gatherings of the masters—including the door of Imam Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal’s jailhouse—by the thousands, quills in hand. Even on the road, if Ibn Khuzayma told his student Ibn Ḥibbān “Leave me alone!” the latter would jot it down in his notebook. Al-Qalqashandī (756-821/1355-1418) in *Ṣubḥ al-a‘shā* (1:467) avers that “no human community on earth even comes close to this *Umma* with respect to the writing of books.”

The text in this first part of the book lacks sectioning and its material is presented as a single block for tens of pages. One rare section title, “How third-century people competed in books written with beautiful calligraphy or other remarkable aspects” (p. 71), is in fact immediately followed by much material about other periods and topics as well. There is an index of proper names, another one of books and a third of places but the editors provided neither a topical table of contents nor a topical index.

The author devotes only a single page to the manuscripts of Timbuktu (p. 215) although that imperial city of the Songhai Empire was for two centuries the epicenter of an important book trade, with dozens of scribes copying books on history, science and religion and one of the most important troves of Islamic manuscripts in all Africa counting a million items. These collections of unique century-old manuscripts were threatened by so-called jihadists who invaded Timbuktu in 2012 and had to be moved south to Bamako through the Niger River. A recent article (<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/News/15003/19/Mali--Restoring-Timbuktu.aspx>) stated they are presently being returned to Timbuktu and restored with the help of South Africa’s Cape Town University. According to the French TV Channel TV5 (http://docuwiki.net/index.php?title=Sur_la_piste_des_manuscrits_de_Tombouctou) the only other countries that offered help in preserving them were France and Switzerland.

Al-Kattānī draws much on the encyclopedist Tāshköprüzāde's (901-968/1495-1561) work on the classification of knowledge *Miftāḥ al-sa'āda fī mawḍū'āt al-'ulūm* as well as on the great bibliographies of Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 438/1047), Ketip Celebi (1609-1657) and Ibn al-Sā'ī (d. 674/1275) the author of *al-Durr al-thamīn fī akhbār al-muṣannifīn*, the travel journals of the Moroccan historian Abū al-'Abbās al-Nāṣirī (1057-1129/1647-1717), and specialized literary biographies such as Ibn 'Umayra's (d. 599/1203) *Bughyat al-multamis fī rijāl al-Andalus*, Suyūṭī's (849-911/1445-ca.1505) *Bughyat al-wu'āt fī ṭabaqāt al-lughawīyyīn wal-nuḥāt*, Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī's (574-626/1178-1231) *Mu'jam al-udabā'* and Ibn al-Qāḍī's (960-1025/1553-1616) *Jadhwat al-iqtibās* which is devoted to the city of Fes.

The author surveys the great library collections of North Africa (pp. 295-340) beginning with the *waqf* libraries of Morocco: "The eastern reader might stop me here and ask, are there any waqf libraries in the Maghreb where students might alight and take sweet refreshment? I would reply with regrets yes, plenty, but there is no student and nothing studied, no seeker and nothing sought!" Follows a descriptive survey of the many libraries of Fes, Meknes, the Sous, Qarawiyyin, Marrakesh and Shinqit. As for the Middle Maghreb (Algeria), he says, "it is now the poorest of places in books and has only five famous libraries." The Near Maghreb (Tunisia) of course has the Zaytuna and Qayrawan but also many priceless private libraries, such as that of Ibn 'Ashūr which boasts an autograph manuscript of Ibn Ḥajar's biographical dictionary *al-Durar al-kāmina*. As for Tripoli it has what is considered the largest Islamic collection in Africa, namely the library of the hadith master Muḥammad b. 'Alī al-Sanūsī (1202-1276/1788-1859).

The author discusses (pp. 340-396) the bibliography genre from the earliest time of the polyglot Hunayn b. Ishāq (d. 260/874) to the landmark, 14,500-entry bibliographical reference-book *Kashf al-zunūn* by the Ottoman polyhistor Ketip Celebi (Haji Khalifa) whom he discusses at length. He asserts (p. 360) that after Celebi's demise in Constantinople "most of his library was purchased by the Dutch ambassador who then endowed the university of Leiden with them." The purchaser was Levinus Warner (d. 1665) who was indeed the Dutch envoy to the Sublime Porte at the time and whose book and manuscript bequest forms the basis of today's Leiden Oriental collection, but it appears that in reality the purchase consisted only in a few manuscripts.¹

Kattānī gives an overview of various genres such as the *thabat*, *fiqh*, *ṭabaqāt* and *taṣawwuf* literatures respectively, then concludes his book with a 200-page epilogue consisting in "pearls" of erudition on various issues, among which: "Those who authored the most in this *Umma*" (1); "Those who reviled their own books" (3); "Etiquette of entering libraries" (5); "Those who wrote while in prison" (6); "Extreme book prices among the early Muslims" (7); "What a pilgrim should take along [*Dalā'il al-khayrāt*]" (10); "Is *zakāt* remitted to one who owns books?" (11); "Books that have special [curative or protective] properties," e.g. *al-Shifā* in times of plague (15); "Expecting problems (*tashā'um*) from reading certain books" such as *al-Iqd al-farīd* (16); "Names of some of the Islamic sciences" (the Arabic name for prosody, *al-'arūd*, was innovated by al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī because he had asked for its inspiration at the Ka'ba, and this is one of its names); "Using books as metaphors," e.g. the poor man in Baghdad lives a furtive and strained life, like a *muṣḥaf* in the house of a *zindīq* (20); "When authors first began to devise titles" (21); "The comparison to

¹ See Jan Just Witkam, "Precious Books and Moments of Friendship in 17th-Century Istanbul," in Mustafa Kaçar and Zeynep Durukal, eds., *Essays in honour of Ekmeleddin İhsanoglu* (Istanbul: IRCICA, 2006), pp. 467-474. I am grateful to Dr. Witkam for drawing my attention to this misapprehension in Kattānī's text.

woodworms,” e.g. “People of Egypt, you are so stingy that since I live in your land I have behaved with my books like a woodworm” (i.e. I have had to sell them to eat) (22); “Prizing the very binding of a book” (23), where the author shows no knowledge of Abū Bakr al-Rāzī’s recently rediscovered *Zīnat al-kataba* (Adornment of the scribes), one of the earliest treatises on early Arabic codicology; “Those who lost their minds when they lost their books” (25); “One who was given a nickname after the fact that he conveyed a book on behalf of an eminent person,” i.e. al-Ḥārith b. Surayj al-Naqqāl (the Transporter), thus named because he was the one who conveyed the copy of al-Shāfi‘ī’s *Risāla* from its author to ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Maḥdī (31); and “Imam al-Suhaylī’s poetry on those who carry knowledge without learning from it” (33).

Gibril Fouad Haddad
Universiti Brunei Darussalam-SOASCIS